

BACKGROUND NOTES ON LAOS

Laos is a small land-locked country which borders on Burma, the Chinese Peoples Republic, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. It thus serves as a kind of buffer state between pro-Western, Communist and neutral states.

When, as a result of the 1954 Geneva Conference, Laos received complete independence, France ceased to provide the support it had heretofore furnished and Laos turned to the US to fill the gap. The Geneva Accords, signed by Great Britain, France, Soviet Russia, the Chinese Peoples Republic, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, specified that Laos was to remain neutral. Although the US was not a signatory to these accords, it agreed to abide by them. An International Control Commission (ICC), made up of representatives from India, Poland and Canada, was set up to supervise the application of the accords in Laos. ICC decisions were required to be unanimous.

The Geneva agreement set aside the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua for the provisional regroupment of the Pathet Lao forces pending their integration into the national community. These forces were led by Prince Souphanouvong and, with the support and guidance of the North Vietnamese Communists, had been fighting the French since 1946.

The integration of the Pathet Lao into the Laotian political scene has been the basic problem facing succeeding Lao governments. In 1957, Prime Minister Souvana Phouma came to an agreement with his half-brother Prince Souphanouvong which provided for the admission of two Pathet Lao leaders in the Lao Cabinet pending total integration of the Pathet Lao military and civil organization into the Lao Government. This reconciliation was a basic attempt to absorb the Pathet Lao into the political life of the country. As a result of this 1957 agreement, known as the Vientiane Accords, there no longer appeared to be any further reason for maintaining the ICC since the purported aim of the latter in Laos was to bring together the Pathet Lao and the Royal Government in accordance with the terms of the Geneva Agreement. In consequence, the Laotian Government requested that ICC leave the country. Although the ICC did leave, there was a violent reaction on the part of Moscow, Hanoi and Peiping who would have preferred to continue using the ICC as a convenient observer of all phases of political life within the country and particularly to use the Polish delegation for transmission of Communist guidance to the Pathet Lao. Following the Vientiane Accords, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) was officially recognized as a legal political party representing the Pathet Lao and the government made arrangements to integrate the Pathet Lao forces into the Royal Laotian Army.

A long period ensued during which the Pathet Lao insisted on being granted a predominant position within the army, which the government refused. Finally, in May 1959, the government scheduled the formal integration of two Pathet Lao battalions into the Laotian forces. At the last minute, both battalions rebelled. One of them fled to North Vietnam and the other finally surrendered. This was followed, in July 1959, by the armed rebellion of the Pathet Lao supported by the Vietminh and accompanied by a propaganda barrage from North Vietnam urging the recall of the ICC. In August 1959, the Central Committee of the NLHS fled to Hanoi and, in September, the Royal Lao Government officially accused the Democratic Republic of Vietnam of aggression and requested the Secretary General of the UN to send a team to investigate the charges. The Soviets strongly objected that such action represented UN interference in Laos and called once more for the recall of the ICC. Meanwhile, the US moved to reinforce the Laotian army. In November 1959, the UN Sub-Committee which had been sent to Laos

reported that, whereas they had found numerous witnesses to the fact that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had furnished various types of support to hostile indigenous forces within Laos, they had found no evidence of border crossings by DRV troop units. It was clear that the North Vietnamese had withdrawn their cadres and military personnel prior to the arrival of the UN committee.

Following the conservative victory in the April-May 1960 general elections, progress toward containing the Pathet Lao and stabilizing the internal security situation was made until in 1960, the government was overthrown by a coup led by army captain Kong Le which returned Souvana Phouma to power. Except for a period of two years between 1954 and 1956 and another short period during 1957, Souvana Phouma had been in continuous control of the Government from 1951 to 1958. After resuming power in September 1960, he declared that his main objective was to bring about an end to strife within the country by means of negotiations with the Pathet Lao. In November 1960, the Souvana government and the Pathet Lao agreed to the formation of a coalition government and to a cease fire in all areas which were loyal to the government. No indication was given as to what criteria would be followed in deciding which areas were in effect loyal to the government and the Pathet Lao had clearly shown that it would use this excuse to direct attacks against any area it wished to control simply by stating that the area was opposed to the government. As a result of this, and in spite of the talks which were being carried on between the government and the Pathet Lao, clashes continued between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Laotian Army.

Meanwhile, General Phoumi Nosavan, Minister of Defense in the previous government, and Prince Boun Oum gathered those elements which were opposed to any negotiations with the Pathet Lao and formed a revolutionary committee in the southern province of Savannakhet. Gradually, General Phoumi and Boun Oum rallied non-Communist elements from all military districts of Laos and gained control over a widening area, which eventually included the royal capital of Luang Prabang. They continued to refuse recognition to the government of Souvana Phouma. Alarmed by the increasing support and participation of the Vietnamese Communists to the Pathet Lao, and the arming of the Pathet Lao from Royal Army military stocks in Vientiane, the Phoumi forces started a drive to recapture Vientiane. General Phoumi attacked Vientiane in December and supported the formation of a government headed by Prince Boun Oum. Having obtained the approval of the King, Prince Boun Oum's government was constitutionally approved by the national assembly in January 1961.